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The Political Outlook in South Korea

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

26 October 1972

SUBJECT: SNIE 42-72: THE POLITICAL OUTLOOK IN SOUTH KOREA

NOTE

This special estimate assesses the outlook for political stability in South Korea in light of President Pak's decision to restructure the ROK Government along more authoritarian lines and -- in effect -- perpetuate himself in office. Related foreign policy implications and certain contingencies are also discussed.

The prospect for South Korean stability over the next year or so is presented in paragraphs 21 through 27, while the longer term is assessed in paragraphs 28 through 30. The earlier portion of the text is largely a supporting analysis of Pak's motivations.

THE ESTIMATE

I. THE CHANGED POLITICAL SITUATION

Pak's Recent Move

1. On 17 October -- with one-day prior notification to the US -- ROK President Pak Chong-hui declared martial law throughout South Korea and suspended the application of certain key provisions of the ROK constitution: the National Assembly was dissolved and all political parties (and other political activity) suspended; legislative and related functions were assumed by an "Extraordinary State Council" (i.e., the present Cabinet, or State Council). This body, according to Pak's public statement, would announce draft amendments to the constitution by 27 October, and submit them to national referendum no later than 27 November. Public approval of the amendments would be followed by a return to civil government in December -- "in accordance with the procedure set forth in the constitution as amended."

2. Reliable information makes it clear that Pak intends more drastic changes in the political ground rules than might be suggested in his public statement. Perhaps most significant, the contemplated

constitutional amendments would substitute indirect election of the president for the system of popular election under which Pak won successive terms in 1963, 1967, and 1971. The new electoral body would consist of several thousand members, handpicked by the president's staff. The presidential term, moreover, would be extended to six years -- with no limitation on the number of terms. (Under the present constitution, amended in 1969 to permit Pak to run for a third term, he would have had to step down in 1975.)

3. The National Assembly (where Pak's Democratic Republican Party [DRP] has always held a majority) would become, at best, a debating society. Its membership would be expanded and heavily diluted by presidential appointees. It could be dissolved by the president at any time for any reason. It would lose all powers of executive oversight. Whatever responsibilities remained to the Assembly would be shared with certain new governmental organs directly controlled by the president. Political parties and activities would come under stringent supervision.

4. At the same time, the constitutional powers of the presidency would be vastly expanded. Important issues could be referred by the president to national referendum, bypassing the Assembly. He would

also gain increased control of the judiciary, which would lose major functions. Finally, the president would be permitted to set aside remaining constitutional restraints and exert virtually unlimited powers whenever he deemed it necessary. The proposed amendments would also qualify many individual rights recognized in the present constitution.

5. In short, the 56-year-old Pak has decided to restructure the ROK Government along clearly authoritarian lines and -- in effect -- to perpetuate himself in office. Pak's pattern of behavior is hardly unique among leaders of underdeveloped states; in East Asia, the pattern has become almost universal in recent years. What is somewhat puzzling in Pak's case is that he has chosen to make this move at a time when his control of the country seemed assured, for several years at least; when its economy, if not trouble-free, seemed to be progressing well; and when its position vis-a-vis its Northern rival seemed to be growing stronger. And to act in the face of predictable displeasure from his most important foreign backer -- the US.

Pak's Motives

6. In his public declaration on 17 October, Pak offered two related justifications for his actions: the changing and -- to him

at least -- increasingly uncertain political environment in East Asia; and the domestic requirements of Seoul's growing dialogue with Pyongyang. In our view, Pak is not wholly insincere in presenting this rationale, though there are at least two other motives of fundamental significance which he has not chosen to advertise. By far, the more important of these is Pak's deep-seated mistrust of representative forms of government and his pronounced authoritarian bent. The other is his belief that, at this point, ROK relations with the US need not be seriously impaired by his action.

7. *New Uncertainties in East Asia.* In Pak's view, events of recent years have made increasingly uncertain the degree to which South Korea can rely on US support for its security and other interests. Like most anticommunist leaders in East Asia, Pak had come to accept the probability of a substantial reduction in the US military presence in the region, though strongly of the belief that South Korea ought to be an exception because -- as he and other South Koreans saw it -- the presence of US ground troops on South Korean soil constituted an essential element in the deterrence of North Korean aggression. He accepted the US force reductions of 1970 in South Korea, though exacting certain assurances concerning the remaining 43,000 US troops and securing promises of substantial US assistance for the modernization of his own forces. Nonetheless, Pak and his lieutenants

remained concerned over the longer term validity of the US commitment to South Korea. They noted continuing political and economic pressures in the US for additional drawdowns overseas, and South Korea itself suffered deep Congressional cuts in anticipated US military assistance programs.

8. South Korean concerns were intensified by the rapprochement between the US and China which surfaced in mid-1971. Pak tended to perceive the development from a viewpoint more like that of Taipei than of Washington. As leader of a divided nation, persistently suspicious of communist intentions and heavily dependent on continued US support, Pak could not view with equanimity great-power dealings in which the interests of small states like South Korea might be subordinated to the pursuit -- however laudable -- of a generalized reduction in regional tensions.

9. The recent Tanaka visit to Peking and the generally rapid pace of Sino-Japanese rapprochement in recent months has provided yet another major source of concern for the South Korean leadership. As Pak probably sees it, not only has Tanaka further diminished the possibility that Japan might back the South Koreans in some meaningful way in the event of a new crisis on the peninsula, he has made

more dubious the utility to South Korea of the American base structure in Japan and Okinawa in such situations. Contingencies of this sort may be remote in the new atmosphere of détente in East Asia, but Pak's state of mind may not be too distant from his words in the public statement of 17 October -- "No one can guarantee that there will never be a resumption of war in the area."

10. *The North-South Dialogue*. The North-South talks are the product of many considerations. The North, having failed to make any significant dent in the South's political armor in a 20-year exercise involving varying forms of hostility, may have adopted its current approach for want of any real alternative. Pyongyang may also be encouraged to believe that as US security policy in East Asia evolves, the diplomatic route will offer the best hope of securing a complete US military withdrawal from South Korea -- and from Japan/Okinawa as well. The North is also concerned to improve its reputation abroad, as one way of gaining diplomatic parity with the South and terminating UN involvement in Korean affairs. Finally, Pyongyang seems to have accepted -- at least temporarily -- Peking's arguments in favor of moderation at this transitional stage in global politics.

11. But there is another side to this "moderation" coin, and South Korean leaders tend to focus on it. In the eyes of men like

President Pak, Pyongyang's current tactics are designed essentially to exploit the new atmosphere of détente in East Asia to probe for soft spots in the ROK body politic and to weaken Southern resistance to potentially harmful communist "unification" schemes.

12. Why then has the Pak government moved into this dialogue with the North? There seem to be three main reasons. Domestically, the government recognizes a need to satisfy growing popular sentiment for demonstrable progress in renewing contacts with the rest of the Korean nation. Second, at top policy levels in Seoul, there is appreciation of the strength of American sentiment for ROK cooperation in moving toward a reduction of tensions in Northeast Asia. Finally, and perhaps of greatest importance in the long run, Seoul has come to see advantage in a direct line of communication with Pyongyang, as one way of forestalling any great-power effort to dictate Korea's future.

13. This last point was emphasized in the May 1972 Estimate on Korea.* But at that time, there was relatively little evidence on which to base much additional speculation along these lines. As the North-South talks have progressed, however, it has become possible to theorize that the Pak government has come to see positive benefit in

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* *NIE 42/14.2-72, "The Two Koreas," dated 11 May 1972, SECRET; see especially Section I -- Korea and the Powers.*

responding to Pyongyang's persistent pressures for formal "political" talks. Indeed, it is even possible to speculate that the existing North-South "Coordinating Committee" is about to advance fairly boldly into this realm -- not in pursuit of unification certainly, but perhaps toward agreements protective of Korean interests vis-a-vis the powers.

14. The "evidence" for this construct is more interesting than overwhelming. Pyongyang's relatively modest propaganda response to Pak's 17 October declaration may indicate that it reads his action as setting the stage for a potentially critical step in the talks scheduled for this winter. (It is known that Pyongyang received at least 24 hours advance notification of Pak's move.) Bilateral contacts at Panmunjom have been frequent in recent weeks, and it appears, to us at least, that more is going on than has been revealed by our sources in South Korea. If, indeed, the ROK Government is ready for political talks with the North, Pak's move is more easily explained. It is a major effort to tighten the reins at home to deny openings for communist-inspired mischief while permitting maximum flexibility to Pak's negotiators.

15. But even if the above "construct" is incorrect, and Pak intends to move slowly in dealings with the North, his move is understandable in the context of long-standing misgivings in Seoul about any sort of

dialogue with the communists. As they contrast the relatively permissive political environment at home with what they know of the tightly controlled situation in North Korea, ROK leaders have tended to perceive an imbalance requiring some sort of remedy. Pak's prescription, until last week, was to tighten control while remaining within the existing constitutional framework. Now, he has evidently decided to discard virtually all pretense of maintaining representative forms and civil liberties.

16. It has been evident, too, that those on Pak's staff most directly involved in North-South dealings have been concerned over the possibility of a breakdown in the Red Cross and Coordinating Committee talks, with the North placing the blame on Seoul. They were dismayed by Pyongyang's reversion to propaganda invective against Pak in early October, and tend to attribute it largely to the government's failure to orchestrate an acceptable South Korean response to the first North Korean delegation to visit Seoul. With tighter control at home, ROK leaders probably feel they can cope with such problems.

17. *Other Fundamental Motives.* Pak's action could not have been very surprising to those who have followed his career since the ROK military seized power in 1961. From the outset, Pak exhibited the most profound *mistrust of civilian politicians*, whose intramural squabbling and ineffectual administration had -- in the junta's view --

led South Korea into a chaotic state easily exploitable by the communist North. Initially, Pak spoke of a decade or more of military rule to strengthen South Korea politically, socially, and economically before turning it back to a new generation of leaders -- moral, disciplined, and untainted by past mistakes. In the view of some observers, his philosophy of government at that time could best be termed "neo-confucian," on the early Kuomintang model. Only heavy US pressures in 1962-1963 caused him to move toward democratic forms.

18. Pak has never been comfortable with the trappings of representative government despite an ability to maintain himself in office to this day. He has resented the limitations on executive power and the necessity of contributing to the corruption all around him to help ensure periodic re-election. Indeed, the prospect of yet another round of manipulation to secure a fourth term in 1975 may have weighed heavily in his decision to abandon the present political system. The National Assembly has been a particularly severe headache for him; and he has detested the uncertainties inherent in dealing with such a body. Open dissent in the press and among students has been an additional thorn in his side.

19. Pak coped with these frustrations in a relatively conservative manner through the 1960s. He was restrained mainly by concern over US

reactions, but also because South Korea seemed to be making genuine progress and he seemed to be getting much of the credit for it. There is reason to believe, however, that Pak had come to feel that his *relations with the US would not be seriously impaired* by a move toward greater authoritarianism.

20. The anticipated structural changes in the ROK Government have been explored by Pak's staff for over a year (since it became apparent that North-South talks in some form were likely to materialize). At first, planning was focussed on yet another constitutional amendment to permit a fourth term (1975-1979) for Pak. But rising frustrations with the politicians and students apparently led to more ambitious thinking. ROK officials conferred on the subject with Indonesian leaders among others, perhaps intrigued by Suharto's success in subduing disparate political tendencies among civilians and his army's apparent ability to administer national affairs. Pak had also observed the subdued US reactions in 1971 to authoritarian trendsin South Vietnam, Cambodia, and Thailand; and, most recently, the apparent American acceptance of Marcos' actions in the Philippines. Closer to home, he probably felt that he had not met with much US displeasure when he issued his "state of emergency" declaration in December 1971.*

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* *In terms of third-country relationships, having just emerged from the UN debate on Korea in good style, Pak had little concern over any immediate adverse reaction internationally.*

II. THE POLITICAL OUTLOOK IN SOUTH KOREA

Short-Term Consequences

21. Whatever Pak's motives, South Korea is almost certainly embarked on the road to more authoritarian government: to put it in stark terms -- one-man rule, rubber-stamp assemblies, controlled press, and repression of all dissent. Can Pak bring it off? Can he maintain control for the foreseeable future, say the next year or so? It is probable, in our view, that Pak can indeed arrange these matters to suit himself over the next few months, and keep the lid on without too much trouble for some time thereafter.

22. Reporting since 17 October, though far from complete, indicates that Pak's announcement has evoked little or no overtly hostile response among South Koreans. The prevailing public reaction seems to be a compound of acceptance of Pak's premise -- that the North-South dialogue requires new domestic political safeguards -- and a feeling of impotence in opposing his will. The college students have so far been quiet; most have been sent home and their schools closed, at least temporarily. Opposition Assemblymen have also been urged to stay at home; many are under close surveillance. The media

have been made subject to prior censorship; (though Pyongyang Radio offered its own unfavorable view of events -- thus helping Pak's cause). Pak's prime political critic, the opposition presidential candidate in 1971, is in Tokyo and has (wisely) decided to remain there. There have not been many arrests, however, nor has the ROK military felt compelled to do more than show the flag around Seoul.*

23. In sum, Pak and his ruling clique are reaping the reward of their diligence over the past year or more. Most important, the military leadership has been concentrated in the hands of men loyal to Pak and uninterested in political abstractions. The vast majority of politicians, even the DRP leadership, have long since been cowed or reduced to dependence on government handouts. Intellectuals and the press appear similarly resigned, though some will probably try to express their opposition to Pak in limited circles as opportunities arise. A few may eventually be able to join in vocal dissent from overseas locations, in Japan or the US. Educators, concerned about their jobs, will probably avoid open comment. All these traditional

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* *It should be noted, of course, that the full dimension of Pak's plan has not yet been made public in South Korea. But it is evident from foreign news dispatches that a great deal of information has been leaked to a broad spectrum of ROK politicans and reporters over the past few days, and the urban classes at least have probably gotten the message by this time.*

sectors of dissent have been the object of intensive surveillance and pressure by governmental intelligence organs for years. Even among the general population, since the "emergency declaration" of December 1971, there has been a heightened consciousness of surveillance by the pervasive security agencies and concomitant restraint in expressing political opinions.

24. Youth, of course, remains inherently unpredictable -- thus Pak's decision to close down the colleges. While the schools are being reopened one by one in accordance with the security situation on each campus, student groups will almost certainly be monitored even more closely than before for evidences of dissent. The government has been determined, particularly since the student demonstrations of a year ago, to suppress all such efforts; at that time, campuses throughout Seoul were physically occupied by the military.

25. We should not, of course, underestimate the adverse sentiment likely to develop beneath the surface in South Korea. Almost 45 percent of the votes cast in 1971 were against Pak, and it is generally acknowledged that of those who did vote for him, there were many who took at face value

his explicit renunciation of political ambitions beyond 1975. Moreover, there will inevitably be some disappointment in Seoul among political leaders likely to lose status under the new setup. In certain circumstances, therefore, an anti-Pak movement might find both leadership and a wide following. It's difficult at this point, however, to identify individuals who might be willing to challenge Pak at any time soon.

26. The key, in the short run, will remain the army -- large, well-trained, and well-equipped. In general, the army has supported Pak through all his trials with civilian opponents for over a decade. More than ever, its leadership seems committed to him. Below this level, moreover, we cannot discover signs of active dissidence. Only in circumstances where troops are faced with the necessity of brutally suppressing mass dissent (as in 1960) could we envision a possibility of military defection from Pak's camp. And it seems to be the job of an impressive number of security agencies to see that such circumstances do not arise.

27. For his part, Pak will wish to proceed in a manner that does not excite popular resentments or crystallize the issues too clearly. This relatively "light hand" has been one of his real strengths in the past. He has been willing, it seems, to avoid harassment of the

average citizen, and the imposition of police-state methods on the general population. Moreover, so long as Pak is able to combine stability and order with continuing economic progress,* most South Koreans will probably continue to give him the benefit of the doubt in assessing his administration and his motives.

The Longer Term Outlook

28. Beyond the next year or so, the outlook is necessarily unclear. Pak may grow increasingly unpopular, no matter how well the country does, as South Koreans grow bored with his monopolization of power and rule by crony. For many, educated and middle-class in outlook, the political give-and-take of the 1960s, with its opportunities for choice and change, may come to appear highly desirable.

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* *The Korean economic boom has been based on foreign -- largely US and Japanese -- investment, and expanding exports. Whether it can be sustained will depend on whether investors perceive the new government as capricious and unreliable, or as stable and predictable. At least in the short run, they are likely to adopt a wait-and-see attitude that could in itself affect economic growth and result in balance-of-payments stringencies. But Pak's record over the years testifies to his concern with the importance of economic performance, and especially foreign investment. Indeed, he has already made an effort to reassure foreign investors.*

Indeed, Pak may be making a serious mistake if he intends to impose a traditionalist order based on an idealized view of Korean society on a nation whose leaders and technicians have come to see modern Japan as their model.

29. ROK foreign policy and related interests would also seem to be poorly served by Pak's new authoritarianism. In certain circumstances, he may find it more difficult than before to secure substantial US military and economic assistance. If so, there could be some adverse feedback into the domestic situation as a result of discontent among deprived generals and technocrats. Japanese investors, in turn, might become hesitant to put new funds into South Korea if they saw a danger of internal instability. Beyond this, it is conceivable that Japanese public opinion might turn against South Korea and contribute to a less favorable atmosphere in official ROK-Japanese relations.

30. Much of this, of course, is speculation. At the moment, prospects for continued political stability in South Korea, even beyond the next year or so, seem good. Any doubts at this stage must center on two sets of problems: those inherent in turning the political clock back in a relatively advanced and seemingly dynamic society; and those related to Pak's problems -- real and potential -- with the US and Japan.

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Contingency

31. Pak almost certainly made his recent moves on the calculation that the US would accept them without serious adverse reaction. He no doubt anticipated official US disappointment, but must have estimated that American displeasure would not seriously jeopardize the US commitment to the ROK or involve such actions as accelerating the reduction of US troop strength, or slowing down or terminating the program of modernization of ROK armed forces.

32. If this calculation should prove wrong, if the US should react with serious moves, Pak would face more difficult problems than he counts on -- both in external affairs and at home. On the external side, a weakening of the US commitment, presumably accompanied by a general souring of ROK-US relations, would no doubt raise Pyongyang's hopes in various ways -- especially if US actions included both a drawdown of US forces and a withdrawal of support for ROK military modernization. (Such US actions would also create some apprehension in Japan about the future US presence in East Asia generally; and, specifically, that trouble on the Korean Peninsula might present Japan with awkward questions if not actual threats.)

33. Domestically, this kind of adverse US reaction -- especially if accompanied by crowing or threats from the North -- would create misgivings about Pak as a leader and the soundness of his course. Even some of his present supporters would probably share these feelings and, of course, his opponents would become even more desirous of seeing him out. Whether these reactions would combine to bring him down would depend on many variables, but the chances of trouble for him would increase.

34. In any event, it seems doubtful that such a US course would produce a positive result in Korea. While Pak might make minor adjustments in an effort to assuage US sensibilities and to salvage minimum US commitments, there would be little chance that he would abandon the main elements of the constitutional amendments. If Pak stood fast and was eventually brought down, the very process might, by itself, create a grave crisis in Korea.

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